Chapter 60

ERM ...
NOT I. HIM.
DID YOU REQUIRE SOMETHING OF ME, CONSORT GYOKUYO?
I HAVE A REQUEST.
JUDGING FROM HIS EXPRES-SION, IT'S SOMETHING HE WANTS TO KEEP ON THE DOWN-LOW AS USUAL.
MAY I ASK WHAT IT IS?

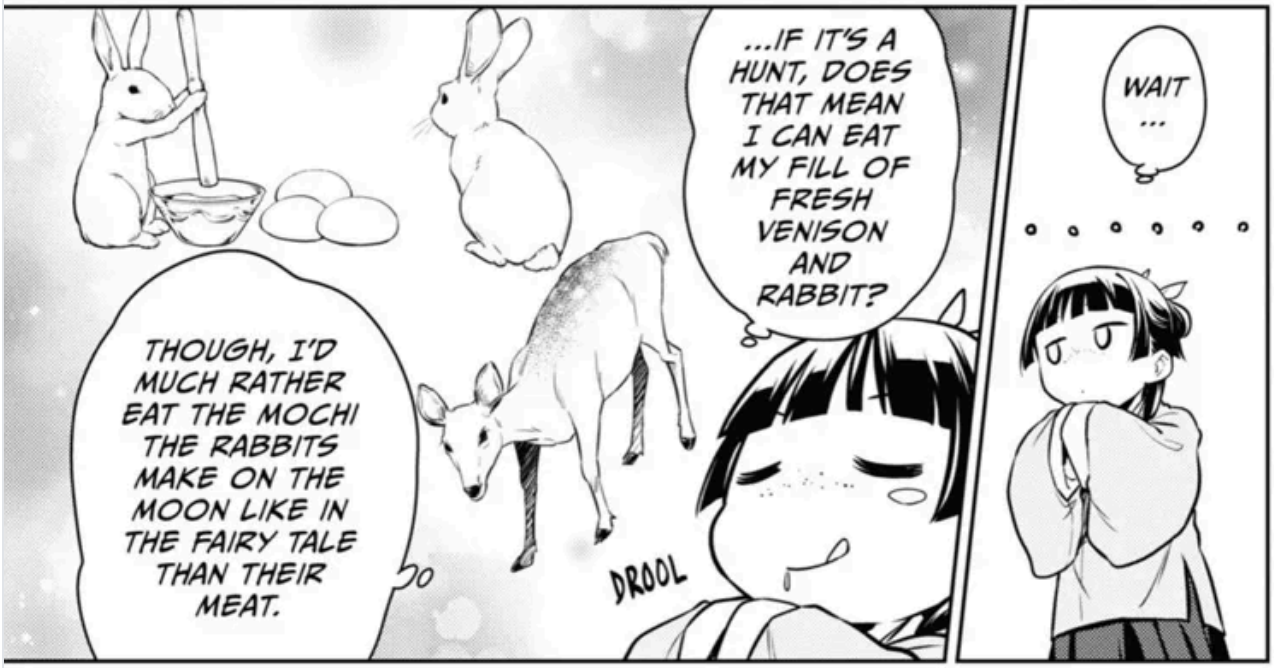
Chapter 60 Summer Retreat

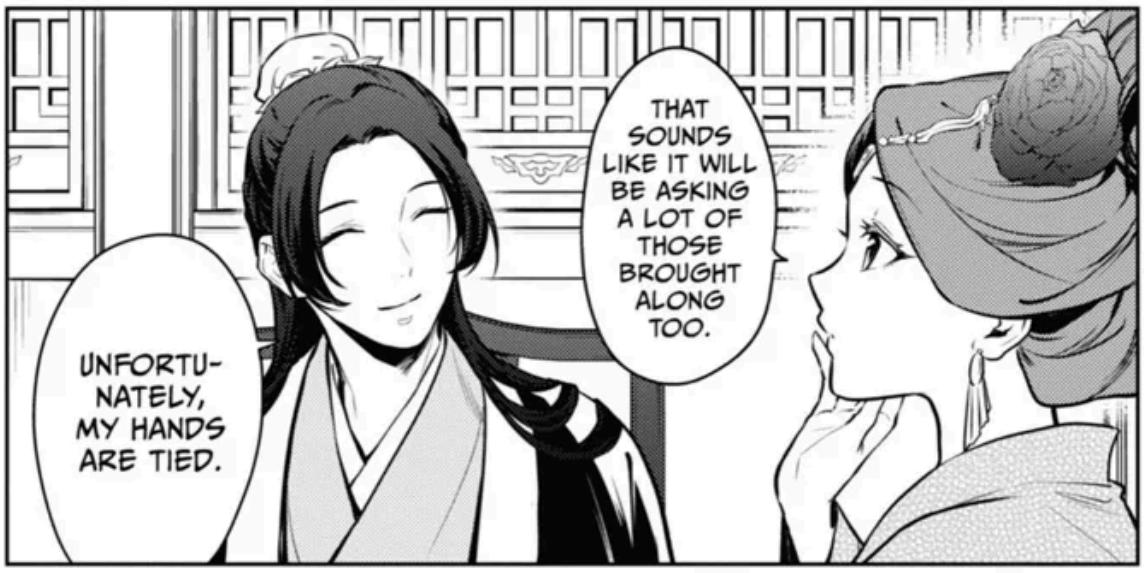
CON-
SORT
GYOKU-
YO.
I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE HER BACK FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS.
HAVE ME BACK ...?

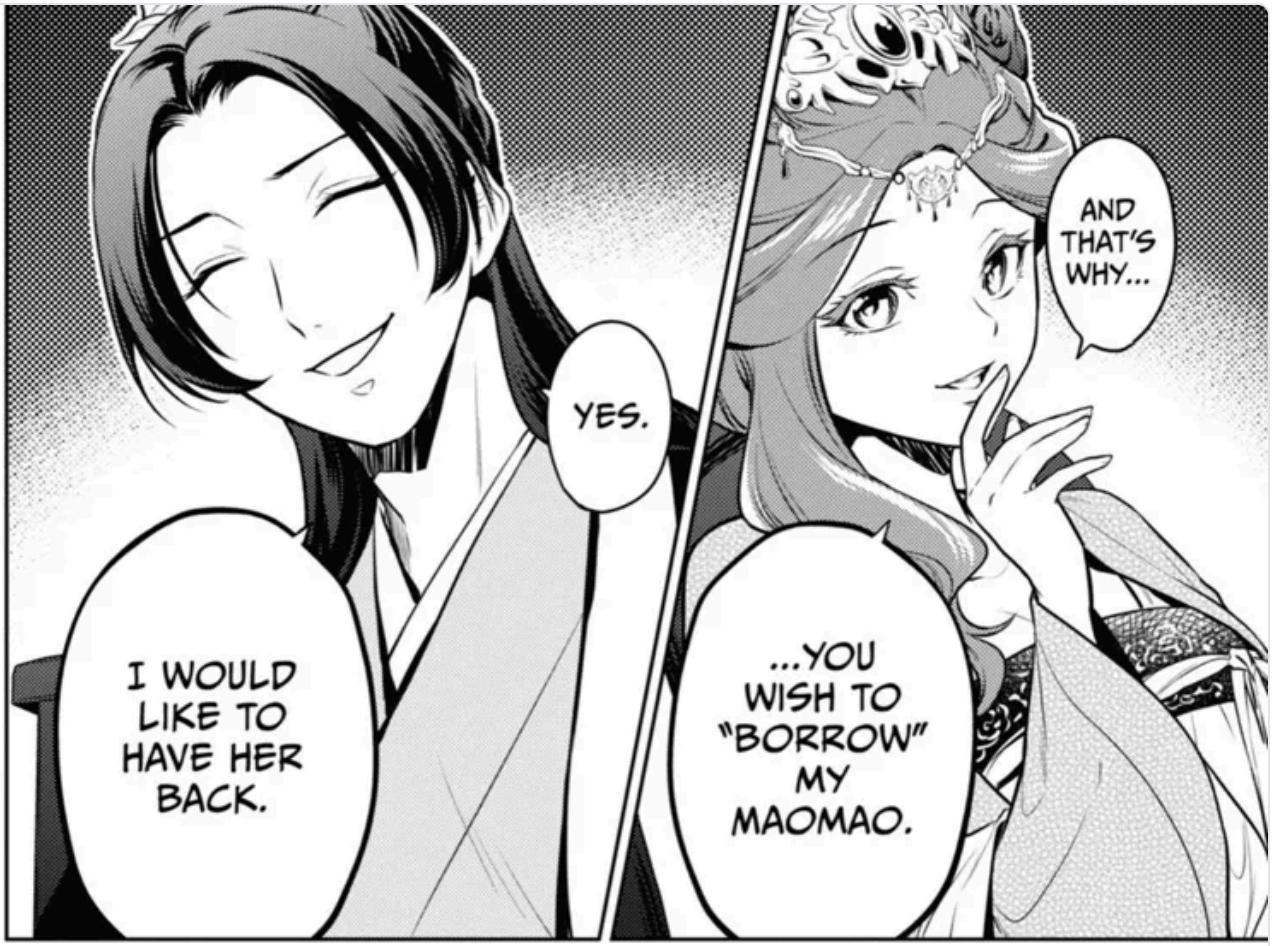
I'M "ON LOAN" UNTIL CONSORT GYOKUYO GIVES BIRTH.
...I'M ONLY BACK AT THE JADE PALACE BY SPECIAL REQUEST.
OH, THAT'S RIGHT. AS A FORMALITY ...
I SHALL LEND YOU MY LADY ATTENDANT IN HER PLACE.
OH, BUT WHATEVER AM I TO DO ABOUT A FOOD TASTER IN THE MEANTIME?
WHILE NOT AS KNOWLEDGEABLE AS THIS GIRL...
...SHE IS FAMILIAR WITH MANY TYPES OF POISONS.
SUCH HARSH WORDS.
HE MUST MEAN SUIREN.
SHE DOES SEEM CAPABLE ENOUGH TO BE MY REPLACEMENT.
HER STUBBORNNESS ALSO GETS A THUMBS-UP FROM ME.
BUT CAN I TRUST HER?
51

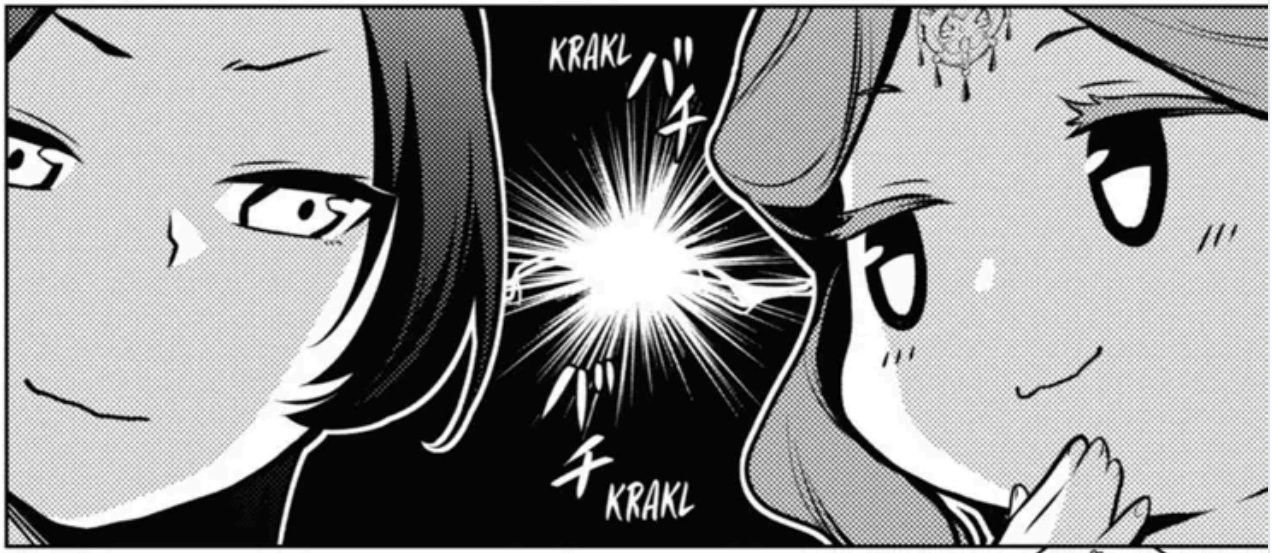
BUT WHO WILL BE TAKING CARE OF JINSHI IF SHE'S NOT AROUND?
SEVERAL DAYS THOUGH? ARE YOU GOING SOME-WHERE?
YES. I'VE BEEN INVITED ON A HUNT...
THAT'S THE KINDA HOBBY ONLY RICH PEOPLE HAVE TOO.
MAKES SURE HE LOOKS FLAWLESS...
CON-SIDERING THE SILVER SPOON HE CONTINUES TO BE FED WITH EVEN AS AN ADULT...
...HE MIGHT NOT EVEN KNOW HOW TO DRESS HIMSELF.
...BY LORD SHISHO.

STARE
THERE'S SOMETHING FISHY ABOUT ALL THIS.
PLEASE DON'T DRAG ME INTO TROUBLE.
I BELIEVE LORD SHISHO...
...IS CONSORT LOULAN'S FATHER AND A HIGH-RANKING OFFICIAL, TO BOOT.


THOUGH, I'D MUCH RATHER EAT THE MOCHI THE RABBITS MAKE ON THE MOON LIKE IN THE FAIRY TALE THAN THEIR MEAT.
...IF IT'S A HUNT, DOES THAT MEAN I CAN EAT MY FILL OF FRESH VENISON AND RABBIT?
DROOL
WAIT ...


UNFORTUNATELY, MY HANDS ARE TIED.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE IT WILL BE ASKING A LOT OF THOSE BROUGHT ALONG TOO.


AND THAT'S WHY...
YES.
I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE HER BACK.
...YOU WISH TO "BORROW" MY MAOMAO.


KRAKL
KRAKL

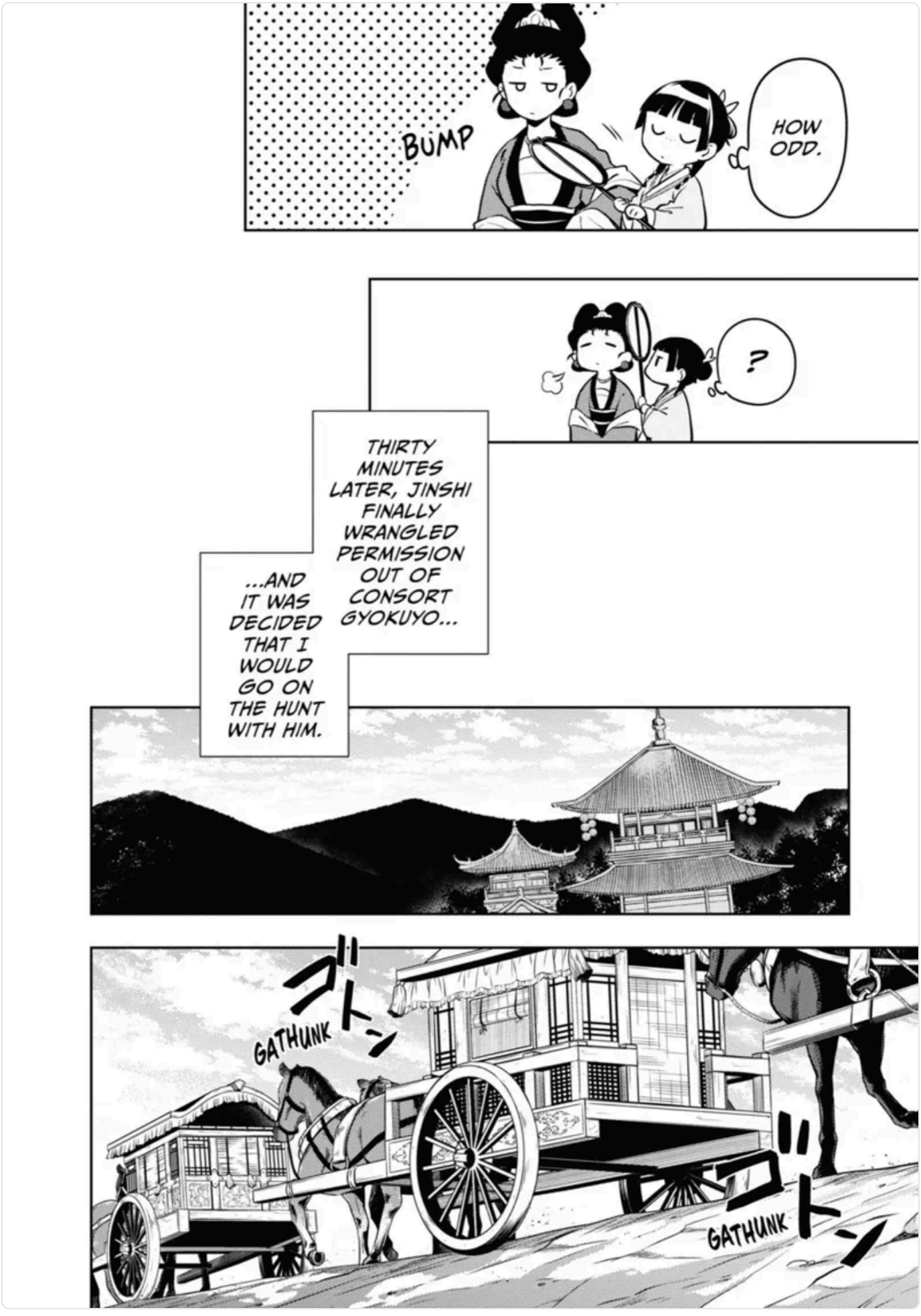
I WOULD BE MORE THAN HAPPY WITH THE LIKES OF THIS GIRL.
NO, THANK YOU.
THANKS.
I'LL TAKE OVER FROM HERE.
I HAVE PLENTY OF OTHER GIRLS I COULD LEND YOU.
MUST IT BE MAOMAO?

YOU HAVEN'T ACTUALLY NAMED HER ONCE.
PRAY TELL, JUST WHO IS "THIS GIRL"?
GIGGLE

TELL ME, GAO SHUN.
WHAT DO YOU CALL MAOMAO?
XIAO-MAO.

...AND WHY DOES THAT MATTER?

.....
SURELY YOU HAVEN'T SOME CUTE PET NAME LIKE "MEOWMEOW" FOR HER, RIGHT?
SO WHAT DO YOU NORMALLY CALL MAOMAO?
HUH.
NOW THAT SHE MENTIONS IT, I'VE NEVER HEARD HIM SAY MY NAME BEFORE.
...BUT WHY IS HE BEING SO AWKWARD ABOUT IT?
I DON'T REALLY CARE OR ANY-THING...


BUMP
HOW ODD.
?
THIRTY MINUTES LATER, JINSHI FINALLY WRANGLED PERMISSION OUT OF CONSORT GYOKUYO...
...AND IT WAS DECIDED THAT I WOULD GO ON THE HUNT WITH HIM.
ゴトン
GATHUNK
ゴトン
GATHUNK

THE NAME OF OUR COUNTRY IS A REFERENCE TO THE FOUNDING LEGEND.
"LI." WRITTEN WITH THE RADICAL OF GRASS WITH THREE SWORDS UNDER-NEATH...
THE "GRASS" RADICAL ALLUDES TO "FLOWER."
IT REFERS TO THE QUEEN MOTHER, THE EARLIEST ANCESTOR OF THE EMPEROR.
FURTHER-MORE, THERE'S ALSO MEANING IN THE SIZE OF EACH RADICAL.
THE SWORD ON THE TOP IS BIGGER THAN THE OTHER TWO TO EXEMPLIFY THE LAND TO THE NORTH.
THE THREE SWORDS REPRESENT THE THREE WARRIORS WHO STOOD AT HER SIDE.
...IS LORD SHISHO, HEAD OF THE SHI CLAN...
...THE SAME HIGH OFFI-CIAL WHO INVITED JINSHI ON THIS HUNT.
AND RULING THOSE NORTHERN LANDS...

IN ADDITION TO THE KA PROVINCE WHERE THE CAPITAL IS LOCATED...
...LI IS COMPOSED OF THREE MAJOR PROVINCES, WITH DOZENS OF SMALLER ONES IN BETWEEN.
WHILE THE LAND TO THE SOUTH OF THE CAPITAL IS KNOWN FOR ITS RICE PADDIES...
...THE NORTH IS DIVIDED FROM THE MAINLAND BY A GREAT RIVER...
...AND DOTTED BY TOWNS AND VILLAGES THAT GROW SORGHUM AND WHEAT.
BEYOND THE GRAIN-PRODUCING REGION, THE NORTH THEN CONTINUES WITH FORESTS AND MOUNTAINS, EVENTUALLY BECOMING THE SHIHOKU PROVINCE...
...AN AREA OUTSIDE THE EMPEROR'S DIRECT CONTROL.
GRUMPY
AND THAT'S THE KIND OF PLACE WE'LL BE GOING TO.
DID YOU GET ALL THAT?
BA SEN

YES, SIR.
GASP
UGGGH...
WHY DID MY FATHER INSIST ON BRINGING YOU ALONG?
OH YEAH...
HAVING TO ENDURE THE ROCKING OF THE CARRIAGE FOR MORE THAN HALF A DAY...
...IS MAKING ME SEA-SICK...
WELL, IT'S NOT AS IF GAO SHUN WAS BORN A EUNUCH.
IT MAKES SENSE THAT HE MIGHT HAVE A KID GIVEN HOW OLD HE IS.
HIS FATHER WAS ALSO INVITED AS A GUEST ON THIS HUNT...
I WAS RIGHT THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING FAMILIAR ABOUT THIS MAN.
...SO BA SEN IS HERE TO SERVE AS JINSHI'S ATTENDANT IN HIS FATHER'S STEAD.
IT TURNS OUT BA SEN IS GAO SHUN'S SON.

IF I'D KNOWN JUST GETTING THERE WAS GOING TO TAKE THIS LONG...
...I WOULD'VE WAITED UNTIL WE ARRIVED TO DO MY HAIR.
MY BUTT HURTS.
GATHUNK
THESE LOWER-RANKING OFFICIALS ARE FIGHTING TO STAY AWAKE IN HIS PRESENCE ...
...SO BA SEN MUST BE QUITE HIGH IN THE HIERARCHY, DESPITE HIS YOUTH.
GATHUNK
JINSHI AND GAO SHUN ARE IN ANOTHER CARRIAGE.
THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE CAPITAL AND SHIHOKU PROVINCE ISN'T SO CLOSE THAT YOU CAN GET THERE IN A DAY OR TWO.
ALTHOUGH THE EMPEROR HIMSELF WON'T BE PRESENT FOR THIS HUNT...
...FROM WHAT I'VE HEARD, THERE ARE A WHOLE BUNCH OF BIG SHOTS ATTENDING.
I HOPE NOTHING UNTOWARD HAPPENS.
61

THIS TOWN HAS COLORFUL BUILDINGS, STONE PAVING, AND A BEAUTIFUL WATER-FRONT.
ITS HIGH ELEVATION KEEPS IT COOL.
THAT'S WHY THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR CAME HERE EVERY YEAR FOR HIS SUMMER RETREAT.
I HEAR THE IMPERIAL FAMILY HASN'T COME HERE SINCE THE CURRENT EMPEROR ASCENDED THE THRONE ...
...BUT THE SHI CLAN TAKES GOOD CARE OF IT.
THE MOUNTAINS SLOPE AT DIFFERENT HEIGHTS, AND THE BUILDINGS ARE CON-STRUCTED ...
...SO AS NOT TO OBSTRUCT THE VIEW.

SO THIS IS WHERE WE'LL BE STAYING.
YOU HARDLY SEE THESE KINDS OF DECORATIONS IN THE CAPITAL.
I CAN TELL THEY'RE WELL-MADE.
GAWK まじ
GAWK まじ
THIS PLACE MUST HAVE BEEN BUILT BY PEOPLE FROM THE CAPITAL WITH AN EYE FOR ART IN MIND.

63

THIS WING ...
...IS CLEARLY MADE FOR THE MOST ELITE OF THE ATTENDEES, BASED ON THE NUMBER OF ROOMS AND THE FURNISH-INGS...
...BUT IT'S SO STUFFY IN HERE.
AND MOST NOTABLY ...

64

...WHAT IS WITH THE WAY THIS MAN LOUNGES?
I KNOW HE MUST BE MORE TIRED THAN USUAL...
...BUT COME ON, SHOW SOME DECO-RUM.

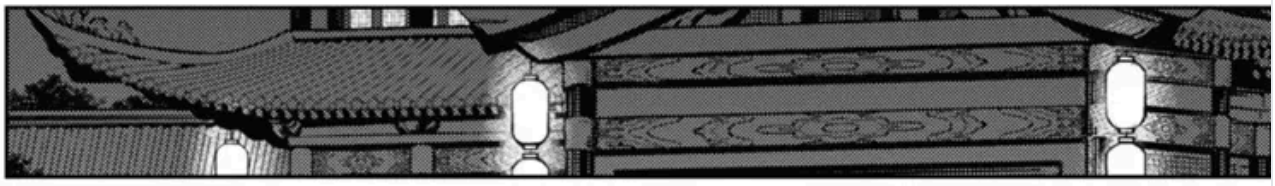
HE MUST HAVE TO WEAR A MASK WHEN HE GOES ON LONG TRIPS BECAUSE HE'S SO PRETTY.
AH, I GET IT NOW.
IS THAT A HOOD?
HE CAN BE SUCH A PAIN.
I SUPPOSE IT WOULDN'T DO FOR HIM TO SMILE AND GIVE EVERY GIRL IN TOWN A HEART ATTACK.
CALL ME "KOSEN" WHEN WE'RE OUT.
JUST ACT LIKE USUAL WHEN WE'RE IN OUR ROOMS.
WHAT SHALL WE REFER TO YOU AS HERE?

YOUR WILL SHALL BE DONE, LORD KOSEN.
HUH?
IS THIS SOME KIND OF STRANGE PREFERENCE OF YOURS OR SOMETHING?
...IT'S HIS—
I'LL EXPLAIN IT TO HER.
AS YOU WISH.
DON'T SAY ANYTHING.
...HM?

THE MA CLAN HAS SERVED LORD KOSEN'S CLAN FOR GENERATIONS.
IT IS ONLY NATURAL FOR THEM TO SHARE THE SAME BUILDING.
I SEE.
...HERE AS A GUEST AS WELL ALONG WITH SIR JINSHI.
THAT REMINDS ME... YOU'RE...
NOD
HMPH!
THEN WHY WAS HE ASSIGNED TO THE SAME BUILDING?
USUALLY, IT SEEMS LIKE THERE'S A DIFFERENCE IN STATUS BETWEEN THE TWO OF THEM.
?
FATHER. COULD YOU PLEASE EXPLAIN THIS?
NOD NOD
SO JINSHI REALLY DOES COME FROM A NOBLE FAMILY, JUST AS I SUS-PECTED.

WHAT?
WHIP
WHSPR
WHSPR
?!

WHAT THE HECK ARE THEY DOING?
BONK
I JUST KNOW THAT SUIREN WILL LECTURE ME LATER IF I DON'T DO ANY WORK.
WELL, I GUESS I'LL PUT OUR BELONGINGS AWAY FOR NOW.



CAN'T WE OPEN THE WINDOW?
WHAT A LUXURY IT IS TO BE ABLE TO JUST SEND A MESSENGER AND HAVE ICE DELIVERED LIKE THIS.
IT'S A BIT MUCH, IF YOU ASK ME.
IT'S A LITTLE MORE TOLERABLE NOW SINCE WE GOT ICE.
?
YOU'LL UNDERSTAND ONCE YOU TASTE TONIGHT'S DINNER.

TALK ABOUT ...
...A MEAL THAT'LL PERK YOU RIGHT UP.

I CAN'T BELIEVE THEY'RE SERVING SNAPPING TURTLE.
NOW DO YOU UNDER-STAND?

72

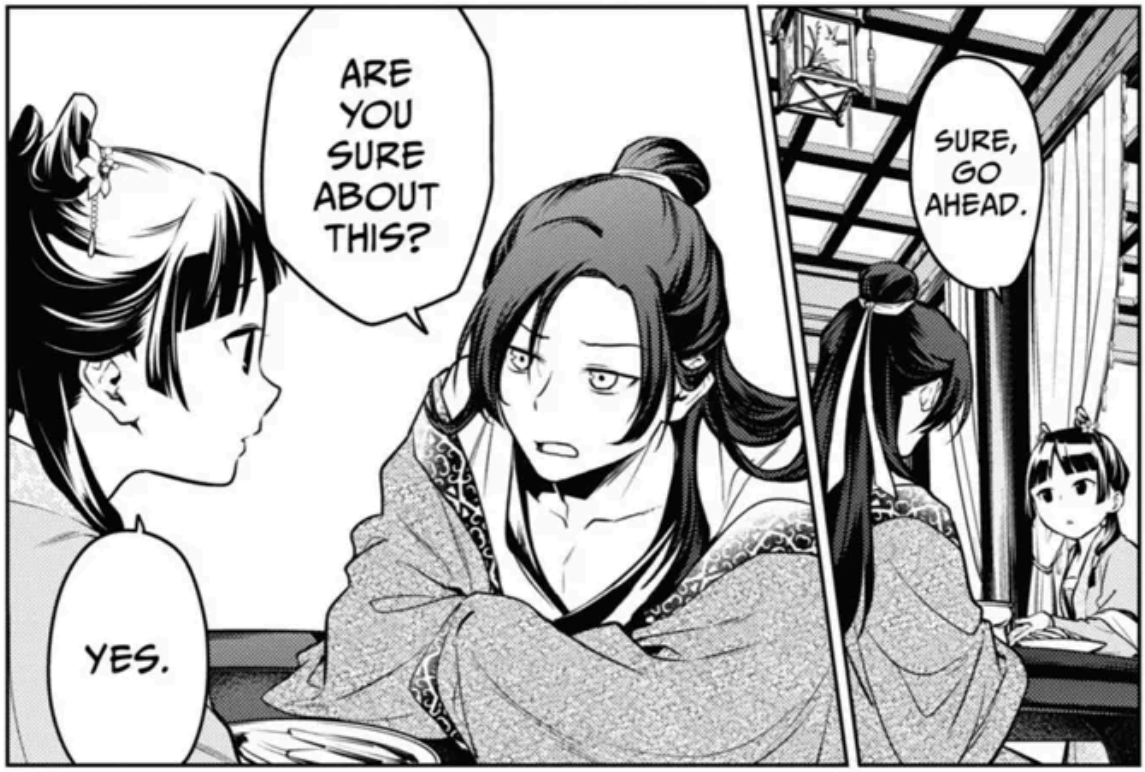
FIRST, TO TEST FOR POISON...
SNIFF SNIFF
GULP
I'M SURE ITS MEAT HAS SIMILAR EFFECTS TOO.
THEIR BLOOD IS USED AS AN APHRO-DISIAC.
SNAPPING TURTLES ARE KNOWN FOR NOT LETTING GO ONCE THEY'VE BITTEN SOMETHING.
IT'S ACTUALLY QUITE STRONG THOUGH.
...HAS FRUIT JUICE IN IT TO GIVE IT A FRESH TASTE.
THIS APERI-TIF...
EVEN IF IT IS SAFE TO EAT, I CAN'T EAT IT.
IT'S NOT POI-SONED.
ARE YOU NOT GOING TO EAT THIS?
RA-TIONS?

IT WOULD LOOK SUSPI-CIOUS IF NO ONE TOUCHES IT.
SHALL I EAT IT FOR YOU?
PREPAR-ING THE RATIONS
IF YOU WANT.
CASUAL
YOU CERTAINLY SEEM TO BE ENJOYING YOURSELF THOUGH.
IT'S QUITE DELI-CIOUS.
YUM.
YUM.
STAAAARE
I HAVE NO GOOD MEMORIES OF SNAPPING TURTLES...
...BUT I CAN EAT THIS WELL ENOUGH.
HUH? WHAT'S THIS ABOUT MEMORIES?
IS IT REALLY THAT TASTY?
YES.

IT'S NOT REALLY A BIG DEAL...
...BUT ONE TIME, WHEN I WAS HELPING MY FATHER, I ENCOUNTERED A VULGAR MAN.
HE WAS AN EXHIBITIONIST. HE PROCEEDED TO UNDO HIS BELT, COMPLETELY EXPOSING HIMSELF TO ME.
THE LIVE SNAPPING TURTLE I'D JUST BOUGHT AT THE MARKET LEAPED OUT TOWARD THE MAN AND—
I WAS SO STUNNED, MY GRASP ON WHAT I WAS HOLDING LOOSENED.
YOU CAN STOP THERE.
I THINK I CAN GUESS HOW THIS ENDS.

SHOULD I NOT HAVE TOLD THAT STORY?
THE COURTE-SANS ALL THOUGHT IT WAS HILARIOUS THOUGH.
I GUESS PEOPLE OF HIGH BIRTH JUST HAVE A DIFFERENT SENSE OF HUMOR.
とり
GLOOM
THE OTHER FOOD IS GOOD TOO.
ARE YOU SURE YOU DON'T WANT ANY?
IT'S TOO MUCH FOR ME TO FINISH ON MY OWN.
AND IT WOULD BE SUCH A WASTE TO LEAVE ANY OF IT.

...MAY I?


ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?
YES.
SURE, GO AHEAD.

WHAT'S WITH HIM?
OKAY.
I REALLY AM GOING TO EAT IT.

77

STARE
?
HMPH!
I DON'T WANT IT.
YOU CAN HAVE SOME, BA SEN.
IN FACT, I INSIST.
AS YOU COMMAND, LORD KOSEN.
78

GRIP
GULP
GULP
IT DOES INDEED TASTE GOOD.
I'M GLAD IT'S TO YOUR LIKING.
WHUNK
ゴクッ…
79

HOW-EVER ...
TWITCH
HOW-EVER?
HOW COME SHE'S SO UNAF-FECTED BY IT?
EEEP!
?
DRIP...
CLATTER
BECAUSE THAT'S JUST HOW MY BODY IS.

...BEING YOUNG CAN BE SO TOUGH.
WOBBLE フラ
WOBBLE フラ

ぱたFLOP

SIR JINSHI.
I CAN BRING HIM TO HIS BED.
WELL, EVEN BA SEN'S ROOM IS BIG ENOUGH TO SLEEP IN.

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH HIM?
SQUEEEAK きゅ
JUST LET HIM SLEEP HERE.
I'LL TAKE HIS ROOM.

81

I'M SURE YOU'RE TIRED THOUGH.
...WELL, IF YOU SAY SO.
82

GAO SHUN IS MIGHTY SMART.
THE GUARDS WILL USE MY ROOM...
...SO YOU CAN STAY IN THIS ROOM.
ALL RIGHT.
SPLOOSH
ぽん
ちゃ
GETTING THIS BIG ROOM ALL TO MYSELF ...
...AND A WARM BATH ON TOP OF THAT.
WHAT A LUXURY.

83

NEXT UP WILL BE THE HUNT, I GUESS.
I DO HOPE IT GOES SMOOTHLY.